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## Manga and the Motivated

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## Manga and the Motivated High Schoolers

By Michael Bitz

information in this article was adapted from *Manga High: Literacy, Identity, and Coming of Age in an Urban High School* (Harvard Education Press).

“Manga is my life. It represents who I am.” You might imagine these words from a child in Japan, where manga is thoroughly ingrained into youth culture and has been for many years. Brent Wilson (1999) investigated the closely knit relationships between manga, Japanese children’s drawings, and national identity. Masami Toku (2001, 2005) explored the historical contexts of manga in Japanese children’s lives, and she investigated a subgenre called “shojo manga” written specifically for and oftentimes by young women. Even the Japanese Ministry of Education has adopted manga as part of the art education curriculum in order to simultaneously engage children in learning and preserve this rich aspect of Japanese culture.

In fact, these words—“manga is my life”—did not emanate from a Japanese youth; they came from a fifteen-year-old African American girl in New York City. She has nicknamed herself Sayuri after a character in a popular manga series titled *Kimagure Orange Road*. Sayuri is learning some words in Japanese. And even though she has never been to Japan, does not have any Japanese schoolmates, and certainly does not look Japanese, this girl is connected to Japan in deeply personal ways. Equally fascinating, Sayuri not only reads manga at a voracious pace but also spends most of her free time creating original manga, just like youths in Japan. Figure 1 is a page from Sayuri’s manga about a stormy relationship between girl and boy.



Figure 1: Excerpt from Sayuri: Manga is her life.

Manga aside, from an educator's perspective, Sayuri's commitment to reading and writing is extraordinary. She reads *books*! She writes *drafts*! She edits and revises her work because she wants it to be perfect; after all, it represents who she is. Anne Haas Dyson (1993, 1997, 2003) demonstrated children's desires to embrace popular literature and new literacies as a pathway to identity exploration, and Sayuri does just that. But imagine a whole classroom of young people willing to pursue reading and writing as a pathway to personal identity and cultural exploration. Imagine children actively engaged in the learning process not for the sake of a grade or test score but for the need of personal fulfillment and intellectual advancement. Now imagine all of that in one of New York City's largest high schools.

### *The Comic Book Project in New York City*

Sayuri and another 20 teenagers at Martin Luther King, Jr. High School (MLK HS) are participants in The Comic Book Project, an arts-based literacy initiative that I founded in 2001. The original target population for The Comic Book Project was elementary and middle schoolers. The goal has been to engage inner-city youths in the process of planning, writing, and designing original comic books as a pathway to literacy, creativity, social development, and community building. What began as a small summer project at a middle school in New York City has expanded to 50,000 children in 15 cities across the United States, and now growing internationally in Nigeria, South Africa, Nepal, Australia, and...Japan.

But New York has always been home for The Comic Book Project, in many ways because of remarkable educators there who have molded, expanded, and evolved the process and products. For example, at Intermediate School 349 in Brooklyn a group of boys work together as

a production team to create a single comic book. They each take a role in the creative development: writer, editor, drawer, colorist, inker, producer, and cover designer. At Public School 153, also in Brooklyn, the participants print digital photographs of their school and neighborhood, then use scissors, glue, and construction paper to produce a sequenced story full of action and drama. They write their captions and character dialogue in pre-drawn cartoon bubbles, which they cut and paste onto the photographs. Public Schools 180 and 182 in Harlem use The Comic Book Project as a vehicle to help first- and second-graders—many of them recent immigrants—to create personal histories in English and Spanish.

These are just a few examples of the many New York City comic book clubs, which have become models for the entire world as to how creative learning can naturally wed with academic skill-building. Yet there is none as influential as the comic book club at MLK HS, the first high school program of The Comic Book Project. It began in 2003 the way many clubs do, with an educator who says, “Hmm, I think my kids could benefit from this.” In this case, the educator was the after-school director at MLK HS, a young woman named Rebecca Fabiano who is truly dedicated to helping struggling high schoolers succeed academically and socially. Many of the children with whom she worked at MLK HS were on academic probation and some had criminal records. Some were living with distant relatives, and others were in foster care. For many of the students at MLK HS, the after-school program was a haven from difficult lives in and out of school. Rebecca was their beacon; they often came to her for advice or help, and they knew she was always looking out for their best interests.

Rebecca had heard about The Comic Book Project through The After-School Corporation (TASC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to sustaining after-school programming in New York

City. MLK HS was one of the few high schools in the TASC network, and Rebecca always had her eye out for ways to engage her high schoolers in new initiatives. She called me, and we met. She explained how she wanted to replicate the process and outcomes of The Comic Book Project for MLK HS—that is, to engage her high schoolers in planning and creating original comic books, then publishing and distributing them in the school and beyond.

Rebecca and I discussed who would lead the club and decided to approach one of the school's art teachers, who at the time volunteered as the after-school chess club instructor. The teacher, named Phil DeJean, was not only excited to lead the club but also had an extensive background in and knowledge of manga. He named a number of students—all manga enthusiasts—certain to join the club. Rebecca and I then put the club into Phil's charge, and the club was on its way.

### *A Focus on Process*

The comic book club at MLK HS met every Thursday afternoon from 4:00 to 5:30. It began with about 12 teenage boys and girls, then quickly expanded to 20. Phil provided every student with a sketchbook, intended for ideas, characters, dialogue—whatever came to the students' minds (see Figure 2).



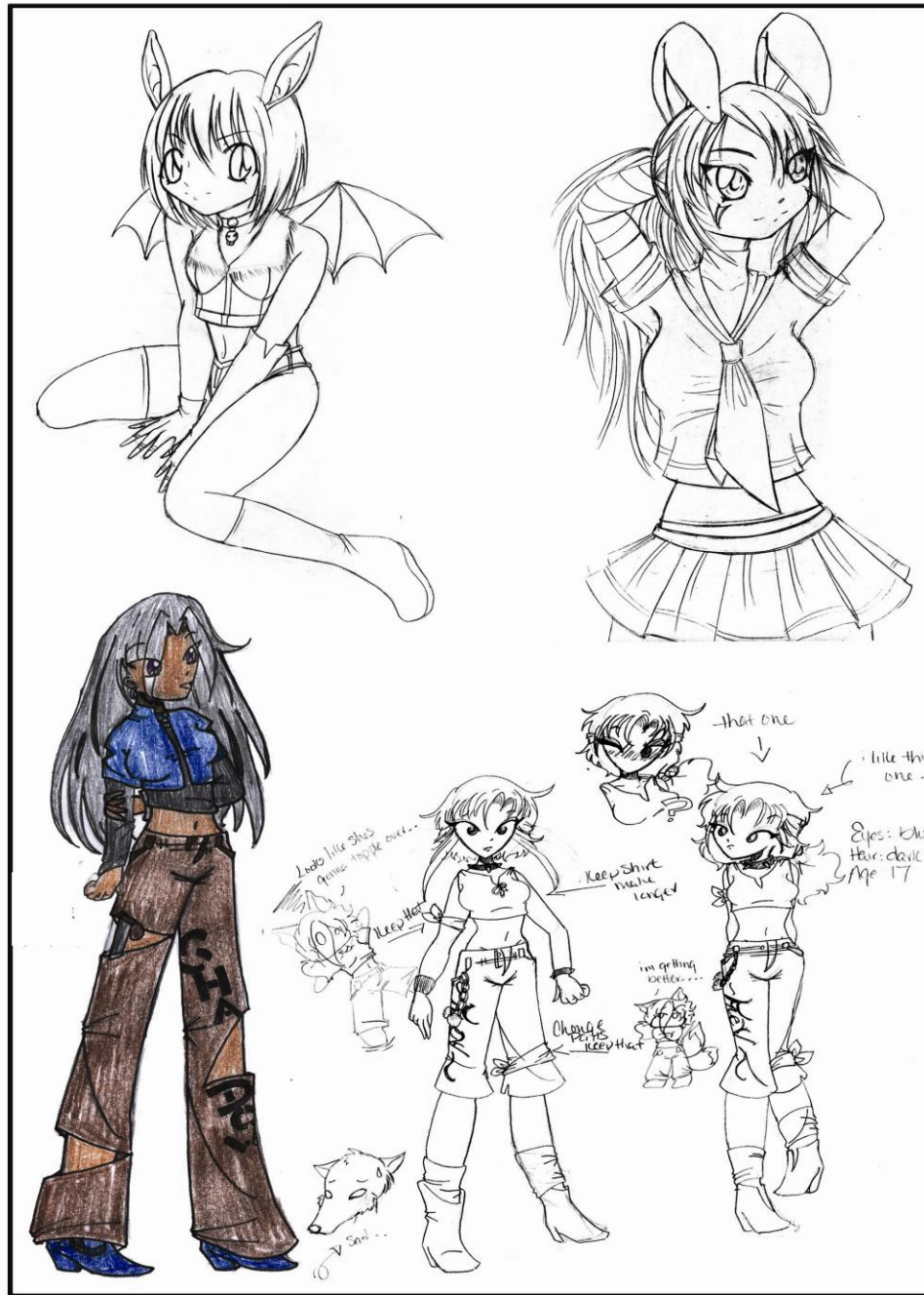


Figure 2: Sample of Phil's character design

Phil would walk about the room, peering over shoulders, always giving praise, and usually making suggestions. As I reported to the Robert Bowne Foundation in 2006:

The instructor of this club was very much a mentor. He never lectured and rarely provided direct instruction; rather, the students came to him for advice regarding character design, panel construction, pencil type, and so on. His typical response was, “What do you think?” Students usually walked away having answered their own questions. Any observer of this club would recognize the level of trust and respect established between the teacher and his students. He demanded effort, and they put it forth willingly. The students seemed reluctant to take a break for a snack, and many could be found working on their comic books outside scheduled club hours (p. 8).

Along with the close relationship established with Phil, the students quickly created strong bonds with each other. They critiqued their friends’ work, offering helpful hints about the ears on a certain character or the sequence of ideas in a developing section of the story. They also traded manga that they had collected, and they informed the group about new publications and additions to their favorite series. As the club sessions progressed, the high schoolers began to don each other with Japanese nicknames. They began to fantasize about their lives as manga characters. One girl pretended to have a mouse that lived in her head and fed her ideas for plotlines and character designs. The concepts in the sketchbooks soon intertwined with real life. I believe that these fantasies were more than youthful follies. They were opportunities to “try on” another life—a life thousands of miles away from all the pressures of growing up in New York City.

The sketchbooks eventually morphed into storyboards. Some students worked at a faster pace than others, but the environment was not competitive. Phil encouraged the participants to hone their storylines and characters early in the process, rather than making difficult adjustments in the near final versions of the comics. Once the students finished penciled pages, they placed



their work on a light box (a tracing mechanism with semi-opaque glass and fluorescent bulbs) and employed a variety of black pens to ink their work onto a new piece of paper. Phil taught the students how to use the pens to design shadows and other effects with cross-hatching, a crisscross technique customary throughout the comic book medium. The students became proficient at cross-hatching and other artistic skills in their sketchbooks before applying those techniques to the panels of their comics. Eventually, pages of original manga were inked and ready for color.

Most of the other comic book clubs that I have worked with used colored pencils, crayons, or markers to bring their comic books to life with color. The students at MLK HS approached color with an altogether different method. Using a flatbed scanner that I donated to the club, they scanned their black-and-white drawings into the decrepit computer in the corner of the room. They then used Adobe Photoshop—specifically the “magic wand” and “fill bucket” tools—to digitally colorize their artwork. The students also used the “text tool” to write the dialogue and captions; they experimented with a variety of fonts, weights, and typefaces for the letters. The results were fantastic: incredibly designed and beautifully colored manga. The children were amazed at what they had created. They were proud of themselves, and pleased that other people were so impressed with their work. For many of the club participants, these comic books represented the first and only time that they had been celebrated for their academic accomplishments.

Once the club’s creations were complete, it was important to celebrate the students’ manga in as many ways as possible. With funding we secured from TASC, we printed the student work in a full-color publication distributed throughout MLK HS and other outlets in the

surrounding community. We arranged a special event at the nearby Barnes & Noble, which generously highlighted and supported community-based programs, in an effort to capitalize on the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation cultivated by children publishing and presenting original work (see Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Elbow, 1998; Graves, 1983). The students presented their work to over 100 people: parents, teachers, friends, and manga enthusiasts. The students were the stars of the event: they sat at a table on a platform with microphones in front of each of them. They introduced their stories, and they spoke about themselves as artists and writers. They explained why manga was so important to them and how they collaborated with each other throughout the process. The event was covered by a Japanese television station—the reporter interviewed the students in Japanese through a translator. Near the end of the event, we announced two students who were selected for a summer scholarship donated by the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont. The students would travel on Amtrak from gritty New York City to bucolic White River Junction for an intense week of cartooning and comics development. For those students and the others from MLK HS who attended the workshop in subsequent years, this was a life-changing experience.

### *A Look at Results*

By all accounts, the comic book club at MLK HS was an unmitigated success. But it is the children's work itself that represents just how much they accomplished. Below are three annotated selections.

Figure 3, titled “My Own X-File” is a first-person account based on “real-life events” about alien spacecraft suddenly appearing above a middle school. Interestingly, although the

story is narrated by a female character in the manga tradition of large eyes and silky hair, the work was actually created by a male student in the club. The author's use of a woman to depict an event that happened to him represents just how integral female characters are in manga. A fan of American comic books might have designed a caped superhero or perhaps a likeness of himself as a comic book character. In manga, however, this young man turned himself into a *bishoujo*, or "beautiful girl."

Figure 3 exemplifies some important aspects of comics in relation to traditional reading skills such as sequencing and making inferences. The first panel introduces us to the title and author; logically, we move immediately to the right and begin reading the story. In doing so, however, we see that the text begins with: "Then I saw something in the sky..." Something is amiss—why would a story begin with the word "then"? Upon some exploration, we realize that we made a mistake in the sequencing. The story begins with the panel just below the title: "It was late at night..." In order to make sense of the story, we readers have to sequence the panels—a skill crucial for young readers to comprehend texts. Furthermore, all throughout this comic book page, as with any text, we have to make inferences about the author's intentions and text references. The page ends with the words: "I will believe the truth is out there..." We can infer that this story will continue, perhaps with the character retelling the tale to disbelieving friends before communicating with the aliens. Only the author knows, one of the true joys of reading and writing.



Figure 3: Comics in relation to traditional story-telling elements.

Figure 4 represents the extent to which manga has influenced the students in the comic book club at MLK HS. In this humorous example by a high school girl, the characters introduce themselves at the beginning of the story, a common opening to a manga. They are different species: fox, human, and bunny. The focus here is on the bunnies; one says, “I’m number 5 out of 620 and still going!” While references to sex follow, there is nothing graphic here, as is typical of manga. Instead humor and lightheartedness reign as the bunny children force out of mind their parents’ commitment to procreation. Also, as is common in manga, the characters go through a series of trials. As the trials progress, the situations become sillier and the story more outlandish.

While the trials are characteristic of manga, the subject of those trials elucidates the extent to which the students have embraced Japanese culture. The character named Strife endures these trials to determine whether he can be considered a *bishi*—short for *bishounen* or “beautiful youth” in Japanese. A *bishi* is a Japanese male adolescent oftentimes exhibiting effeminate characteristics and demonstrating sexual ambiguity. While the reference is common in modern Japanese manga and anime (where this young American creator certainly learned of it), the term extends as far back as Lady Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tale of the Genji* first published around 1000 B.C.E. Several other Japanese terms appear in the girl’s manga, including *chibi* (diminutive child), *ecchi* (pervert), and *miko* (priestess).



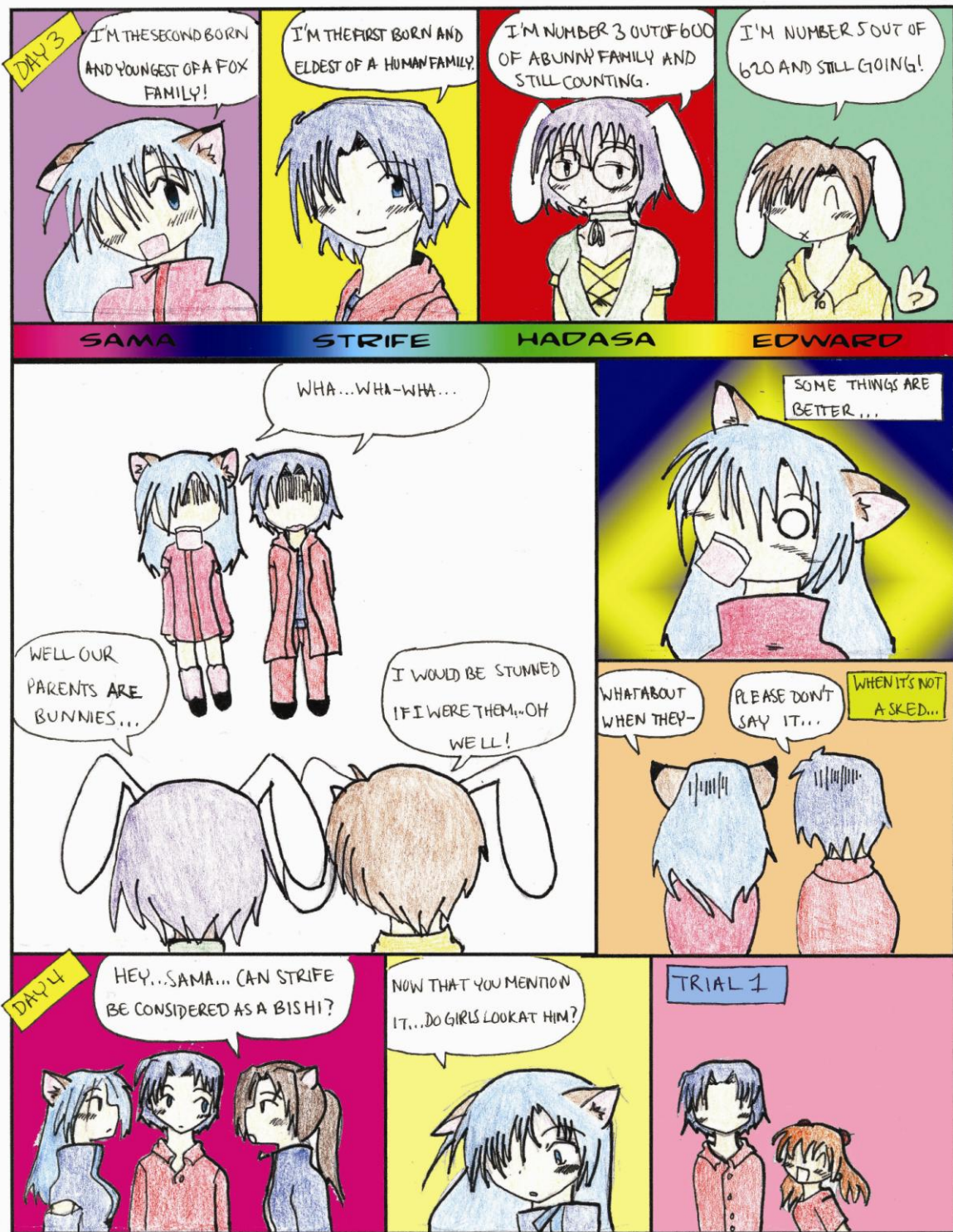


Figure 4: Manga's influence is obvious.



Figure 5, by a male club member, is a dynamic visual display representing another aspect of Japanese culture that particularly attracted the boys in the group: samurai warriors. In this example, the panels overlay each other in such a way that the reader absorbs the sequence alongside the overall impact of the page. The warrior's sword halves the page, allowing the author to change the point of view from a close-up on the warrior's face to a pan of the landscape, accompanied by a dramatic "wshhh" of the leaves. The details on this page—note the hilt of the sword—elucidate the dedication of this particular student to creating manga. This is neither a simple sketch nor a random page of doodles; here is a well-planned and carefully crafted excerpt of visual and literary narrative.

The page is also the prelude to a violent battle scene, which was common in the work of many club members at MLK HS, including some of the girls. Rather than banning violent content in the students' comic books, Phil encouraged the students to think critically about violence, and they discussed pertinent questions. Why does violence occur in society? What are some ways that your characters could avoid violent confrontations? If you are going to include violence in your comic, what are some ways to portray the action so that it is appropriate for young audiences? These open-ended discussions, which usually transpired while the students were hard at work on their comics, allowed for frank and honest dialogue about the nature of life and the world in which we live, lessons that go well beyond the ink of a comic book.

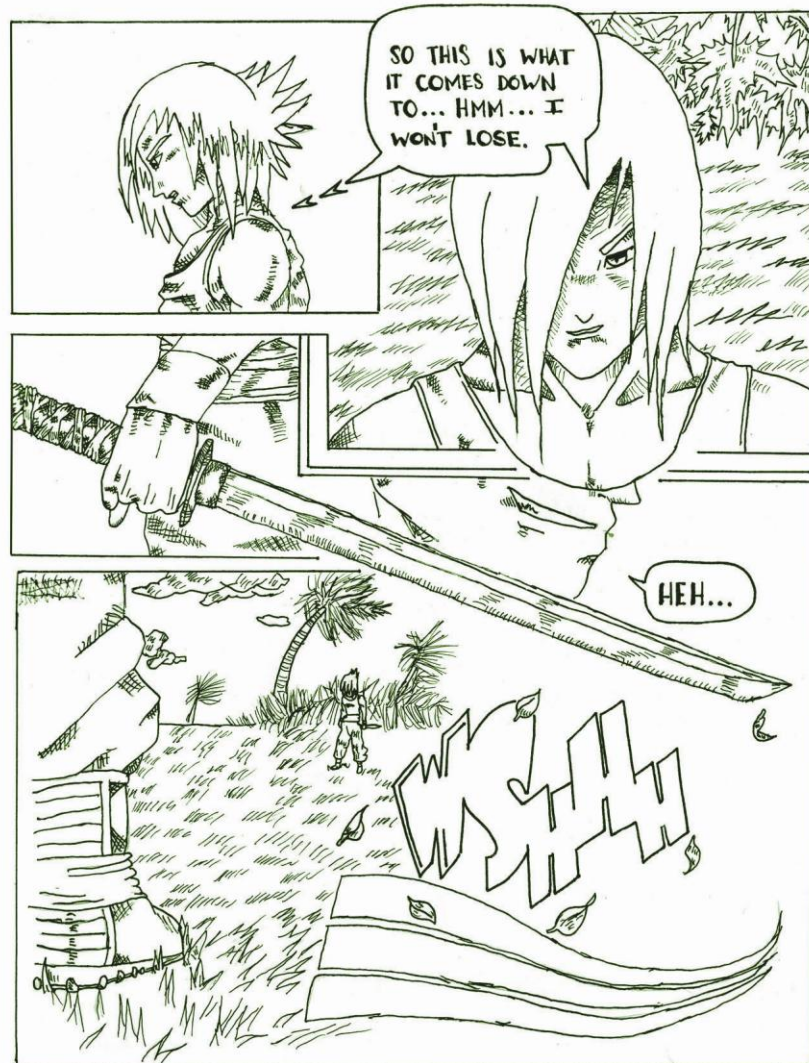


Figure 5: Dynamic display of culture and form

### *Meeting the Standards*

The New York State Learning Standards for English Language Arts (1996) reinforce that literacy entails “reading, writing, listening, and speaking,” and NCTE/IRA define the English language arts as reading, writing, listening, speaking, visualizing, and visually representing

(1996). Although these student manga creators spent an extraordinary amount of time drawing and designing their manga, they also spent extensive time writing their plots and storylines; correcting elements of grammar, spelling, and punctuation; considering the literary elements of tone and atmosphere; drafting and revising character traits and plot twists; and publishing and presenting their completed products. In other words, many (if not all) of the literacy skills and practices that English language arts teachers reinforce in their classrooms were embedded into the processes and products of the MLK HS comic book club. Based on these activities, students addressed NCTE/IRA standards 3,4,5,6,and 12.

In an effort to promote all realms of literacy, we often encouraged the students at MLK HS to speak about their creations and experiences. Below is a transcription of a speech by a young man named Keith who was a member of the club since its inception. Keith has created a series of comics about a character named Jack Snipe, a cyborg ninja with a goal to assist helpless people in the world. Jack Snipe's backstory begins in a foster home. Not coincidentally, Keith had been in foster care since he was young. In his senior year of high school, he "aged out" of the system, which put him on the street for several weeks. In the speech, Keith describes how the club at MLK HS began and how it has evolved.

Here I stand in front of you to tell you a story. A story of an after-school program club called the comic book club. This club from what I experienced has changed the lives of many young and talented artists. Especially mine, but just as the way every story has a beginning, so does mine.

For as long as I could remember, I loved cartoons and superheroes. I especially loved art. When I entered ninth grade at MLK High School, I loved to draw. My art back then was raw and booming with potential, but it lacked discipline. It lacked style, and most importantly it lacked direction. One of the teachers at the after-school program, Ms. S. saw this and introduced me to Mr. D. who was doing this new program called the comic book club. At the time, although I really loved

them, I didn't really know what a comic book was or what one even looked like. So Mr. D. gave directions to a comic book store that he goes to called Jim Hanley's Universe. He told me to go there and look around. The next time he sees me, he will ask me a question that would change my life forever.

So I went to the store later that week. As soon as I stepped through the door I felt like I was in heaven. I felt like that place was where I belonged.

Going to that store opened my eyes into the worlds of famous heroes like Spider-man, Superman, X-Men, the Avengers, etc. Not only them though but to other comics that I never seen before. They introduced me to the world of manga.

When I returned the next week, I was more focused and driven than I was before. Going to that store had given me a sense of focus and direction. It made me realize the thing that I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. So when I went to the club next week, Mr. D. asked me the question that would change my life forever: "Are you ready to master the art of making comic books?"

After that week, Mr. D. taught me and the rest of the club members the basics on making comics. He taught us how to ink, how to draw characters, how to design stories, panel design, etc. Back then since it was the club's founding year, there weren't a lot of members. But we all used everything we knew and created comics. At the end of the year, there was a grand ceremony at Barnes & Noble up the street from the school. At the ceremony we were treated like celebrities. TV cameras, art galleries, an audience, we even did a comic book signing. This was set up by the staff of the after school, Patricia Ayala and her boss Dr. Michael Bitz, a guy who we referred to back then as the "comic book guy," because he would come and not only check up on our progress of our comic books, but he would bring us free comics. The first year was great. Although when it ended we all were sad. But I wasn't. I was determined to use my summer not as a vacation but to use it as a time to train and better myself. So that way next year my comic would be twice as good as the first.

The next year was a good year. That year was the year I met people who were great artists and wrote great stories, but was a little wacky and hyperactive. That year was the year I met the masterful artist Yuri, whose art was so good you could've sworn she was some type of prodigy, but her art makes up for her cluelessness. The cute but wacky Laura, whose art and stories were deeper and more meaningful than they appeared. The shy Treasure, whose art was really unique and great but back then she couldn't see it. The energetic and bold Imani, whose art and stories were often hilarious. The quiet but intimidating Lauren whose art level was real close to Yuri's. These girls were on a totally different level. We all got together and worked on our individual art skills.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the next year, that was a bad year for me. I was going through some problems at home and I was banned from the comic book club...for a month! But when I returned I met some truly amazing artists. There was the legendary Kisha. Her art was truly masterful. The only thing was that she lacked direction. She drew some truly breathtaking pictures, but she didn't have a story for them. So Mr. D. helped her out personally. There were also the bad boys of the comic book club: Jonathan and Oliver. Those two were truly an amazing pair. J. had an amazing style, and his stories were not only amazing but truly spectacular. They were stories that would get you all excited and inspired. Liver's art was crazy hot. With Mr. D.'s help, he learned how to truly master the American style. Not only that, but he was able to do what only a little of us had barely managed to do. He had truly mastered anatomy. There was also Davon; D., in my opinion, learned how to write a captivating story way before he didn't know anything about comics.

I was happy to return to the comic book club because it rekindled my love for comics. It also drove me to be a better artist than I originally was. I guess you could see it from my actions.

As the problems got more and more serious, it became harder and harder for me to be in the comic book club. So I drew and worked on comics whenever I could.

With me drawing all the time, I became known as the artist of the school. Around that time I guess the teachers noticed this. That's when Roy, the parent coordinator of the school, asked me and some other people from the club to do murals for the school.

I guess around that time is when me and Reggie started our rivalry. Our rivalry became so great and well known that the school itself started changing. It wasn't a very big or noticeable change—that only someone who would sit back and observe could notice. The school itself around that time started taking a turn toward art. The school started asking the artists to do more and more art for the school. It was like a dream come true. Not only that, but the students around the school started to become more and more outgoing with art. People started coming up with their own stories, and people who had stories but was too shy to share started exposing their stories. It was at this time that the comic book club flourished.

At the end of the school year my problems at home became so great that I didn't get my comic done. But Mr. D. helped me put something together. At the grand ceremony, there was so much people there that there wasn't enough room up on stage. After the questions, Dr. Bitz and Ms. F. (the runner of the after-school program) had announced that the comic book club had grown so much that it had spread out to different schools. Also they announced that me and L. had won a

scholarship to go to Vermont, to a school that had a special program that taught young artists about comic books and cartoons. It was great. A week after the ceremony, me and Laura left for Vermont. It was great there. We met people from all over the United States. (My roommate was from Texas). And the classes we took were taught by famous comic artists. There they taught us all the basics of comic making and the history of comics and cartoons. Me and Laura were focused and worked hard all day, and we both went crazy all night. Sadly, when we came back to New York, Laura moved to Florida.

The last year wasn't so great as the other years. The comic influence on the school wasn't as great as last year. Also a lot of wannabe, sucky artists tried to step up and claim they were the best. Also, my problems in my personal life were so great that I was hardly ever at the club. The rivalry between me and Dreadhead grew tenfold, and at the ceremony at the end of the year it was different. They did a ceremony where children from all over came and shared out their comics.

Now I stand in front of you all today to say that I love the comic book club. It helps you grow as an artist and also lets your mind flourish. The comic book club is a great program. It led up to help me be the great artist I am today.

### *Conclusion*

Imagine everything that Keith has experienced, and then letting your “mind flourish” and referring to yourself as “the great artist I am today.” Here lies the true power of the arts specifically and creative expression in general. They can be actual, tangible pathways to a better life. Where once Keith had every reason to lose hope for a future, making comic books helped him establish goals and dreams. And while he may or may not become a famous comic book creator, he has certainly built academic and technical skills relevant to a variety of careers, including graphic design, advertising, publishing, animation, and even business. He is entering Kingsborough Community College this year, and I—like all the other adults who have seen him through his high school years—am keeping my fingers crossed.



The comic book club at MLK HS lives on, every year culminating with a publication, panel discussion at the Barnes & Noble, and two fortunate students taking the seven hour train ride to Vermont for a week of intensive cartooning. While Rebecca has since moved to Philadelphia, Phil still leads this group of high schoolers, and their work has grown in quality and quantity. Moreover, other comic book clubs around the country have used the work from MLK HS as a model in terms of form and process.

When I look back at what the students at MLK HS have accomplished over the past three years, I am struck most by their true desire to create comics, whether manga or otherwise. Had they not had an outlet for their creations at the school, they would be writing and drawing comics at home or in the park or wherever they could sit with paper and a pencil. Instead, the Comic Book Project offered them a safe house (Pratt, 2002) in which to explore their talents and form their identities. They willingly and actively communicate by reading, writing, listening, and speaking for information and understanding, literacy response and understanding, critical analysis and evaluation, and social interaction. In other words, they accomplish every one of the state learning standards in English language arts. If we educators could only pull our heads out of our textbooks, we would see a fertile world of literacy and learning just waiting to be explored.

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